

Description of Child Welfare Assessment Process

Overview of Local Assessment Process

The assessment process is designed to explore how child welfare agency structure, local policies and procedures, service delivery strategies and the involvement of tribes, community institutions such as courts and other agencies such as law enforcement and schools affect child welfare program outcomes in the areas of child safety, permanency, out-of-home care and child and family well-being. Since the child welfare program is county-operated in Wisconsin, to understand the factors that affect child welfare outcomes statewide, it is necessary to analyze outcomes at the county level.

Once the process is completed, the assessment results will be used for local program management purposes, including developing local program plans for state funds in future years. The process will help engage stakeholders in efforts to improve service delivery and local program outcomes. At the state level, the results will be used to prepare for a pending federal review of the Wisconsin child welfare program and design training, technical assistance and program monitoring strategies. The Department will also use the assessment results in state-level strategic planning, establishing budget priorities, and setting the legislative agenda.

The local assessment process includes an agency overview to obtain information from child welfare agencies on local program operations, targeted questions on certain aspects of the local child welfare program, and community discussions with key stakeholders to examine program outcomes and factors affecting those outcomes. The program overview and targeted questions will provide information that will guide local planning for the child welfare program. The Department will also use the information to develop a statewide summary of child welfare program operations that identifies how local practices affect service delivery. The community discussions provide a mechanism to obtain greater community participation in service delivery and community responsibility for child welfare program outcomes.

The assessment process is focused on county-specific program outcomes, using individual county data profiles developed from abuse and neglect and out-of-home care data submitted by counties as the basis for local analysis and community discussions. The assessment process covers the broad scope of the child welfare program, including both child protective service and juvenile justice use of out-of-home care. Counties will be given considerable flexibility in how to conduct the process so the assessment can be individualized based on how counties operate their child welfare programs. Counties can also incorporate items of local interest into the assessment and should take ownership of the process so it meets local as well as state needs.

Purpose and Benefits of the Assessment Process

The child welfare assessment process is designed to support outcome-based program planning, engaging community stakeholders and preparing for the federal review, with each of these purposes having immediate and continuing beneficial impacts for the child welfare program.

Good program planning requires the examination of program outcomes to identify whether services are working and to set goals for improving the effectiveness of program services. For the child welfare program, it is important to evaluate outcomes in the areas of child safety, permanency for children in out-of-home care and child and family well-being using data on key program indicators. The assessment process will encourage outcome-focused planning practices at the local level. The Department will provide county data profiles on an annual basis so that local agencies can see year-to-year changes and analyze the effect of services strategies on program outcomes. The outcome focus for planning will lead to improved services to program clients and more effective use of program resources.

The child welfare program involves a number of institutions, agencies and individuals in achieving safety, permanency and well-being for children and families. While county child welfare agencies play the lead role, the program has extensive involvement by tribes, institutions such as courts, other agencies including prosecutors, law enforcement and service providers, and other organizations and individuals in delivering program services and meeting program requirements. Maintaining effective working relationships with these stakeholders depends on educating the stakeholders about child welfare program services and obtaining their active engagement in service delivery and collaboration activities. The assessment process provides an opportunity to educate stakeholders about their impact on child welfare program outcomes and to engage stakeholders in improving working relationships at the local level.

The federal government is conducting comprehensive children and family service reviews of state child welfare programs, examining state outcomes and evaluating the service delivery capacity of states. The federal review of Wisconsin's child welfare program is scheduled for 2003 with statewide assessment activities beginning in late 2002. Since child welfare services are operated primarily by county agencies, it is essential to understand local program operations and have local agencies assess their program outcomes for the state to prepare for the federal review. The Department will use the assessment process results to analyze the factors affecting program outcomes and design statewide program improvement strategies, including ways to better support local agencies through training, technical assistance and improved program data reporting. The Department will work with counties to make continued improvement in the child welfare program, particularly in those areas where the state must improve outcomes to meet federal performance standards.

Pilot Experience with Assessment Process

The child welfare assessment process was piloted in 10 counties during the period of October through December 2000. The pilot counties included Green Lake, Jefferson, La Crosse, Marathon, Outagamie, Racine, Rusk, Sauk, Waukesha, and Waushara. The pilot counties completed an agency overview and conducted community discussions to test the assessment process, including providing feedback on the outcome data, the assessment tool and the assessment process. This feedback was used by the Department to design the final assessment process, including the data profiles, assessment tool and instructions for the community discussions. The assessment tool, containing the agency overview, targeted questions and community discussion questions, received extensive input by county staff.

The pilot counties found the assessment process an effective way to educate community stakeholders, establish or enhance collaboration mechanisms, and understand how local program structure and service delivery strategies affect program outcomes. The Department has worked closely with the Wisconsin County Human Service Association (WCHSA) in developing the assessment tool. The efforts of the pilot counties in testing the process and WCHSA in reviewing the assessment tool are sincerely appreciated by the Department and will make the process more beneficial for all counties statewide.

Child Welfare Outcome Areas

The assessment process will examine outcomes relating to child safety, permanency, utilization of out-of-home care, and child and family well being. These outcome areas parallel the areas covered in the federal children and family services review. The outcomes considered, however, are not limited to only federal performance outcomes as there are a number of areas of state interest. Counties can add items of local interest to the assessment process as well.

The following are some of the program areas that are explored in the assessment:

- Child Safety: Substantiation of maltreatment, risk assessment and safety services.
- Permanency: Permanency planning, use of relative care and termination of parental rights.
- Out-of-Home Care: Placement selection, placement stability, re-entry and length of stay.
- Well Being: Family involvement in case planning, visitation and access to services.

Counties can establish discussion groups on each of these outcome areas or have discussion groups cover multiple topics depending on which stakeholders will be involved and local preference on how to conduct the discussions. The data profiles include caseload and outcome data that can be considered by the discussion groups to discuss specific questions in the assessment tool. Other questions, such as those questions relating to well being, are more open-ended in nature and are not linked to information in the data profiles. While the assessment process is designed to cover both child protective services and juvenile justice (excluding juvenile corrections), each county will need to define the scope of their local child welfare program in order to interpret their program outcomes.

Using the data profiles, counties are encouraged to compare their local program outcomes with state averages and outcomes in other counties. While counties are not expected to justify the level of their outcomes in the assessment response, the use of comparisons will help to identify factors that influence the level of the local program outcomes and suggest other counties that agencies could contact for information on their child welfare program practices.

Contents of County Data Profile and Data Sources

The county data profiles include county-specific information on child safety and out-of-home care program activity, the nature of clients served and a number of program outcome indicators. The profiles contain caseload and other context information showing the volume of child welfare program activity for both protective services and juvenile justice clients (excluding juvenile corrections). The profiles contain program outcome information relating to child safety, permanency and out-of-home care utilization computed in accordance with how the federal government computes state program outcomes for federal performance measurement purposes. The profiles also contain demographic and economic information to facilitate comparisons between counties.

The county data profiles are designed to give counties information on how county-specific outcomes compare with state averages and allow the community stakeholders to participate in discussions on how the demographics of population served, the structure of child welfare program operations and local service strategies might affect local program outcomes. The county data profiles will be produced on an annual basis so that counties can continue to analyze local program trends and use outcome data in their local program plans for state funds provided by the Department.

The primary data sources for the data profiles are child abuse and neglect (CAN) information reported to the Department using CFS-40 forms and out-of-home care information reported in the Substitute Care Module of the Human Services Reporting System (HSRS). Information from other sources is also included in the profiles. Counties will be given discretion on how to use the data profiles for the assessment process and can use local program data to supplement the state data. The data will be for calendar year 1999 with several years of out-of-home care caseload data provided and out-of-home care outcomes computed for 1997-1999 since outcomes can fluctuate from year to year. The Department recognizes there are issues with the quality of CAN and HSRS data and will include caveats in the data profiles. However, the timeliness and accuracy of local data reporting is becoming more critical and local program outcomes will be computed by the Department on an annual basis.

Role of the Leadership Team

To begin the assessment process, each county will establish a leadership group to provide local direction for the process. At a minimum, the leadership group should include the county human/social services director, a children's or juvenile court judge or court commissioner, a district attorney or corporation counsel who handles child welfare cases, or their designees. The leadership team can also include other key individuals, such as county board members, chief law enforcement officers and school superintendents, who can provide leadership to the local assessment process. County directors will be responsible for contacting the other individuals to put the leadership teams together.

The leadership team will determine the format for the community discussions, recruit stakeholders to participate in the discussions and set parameters for the discussions. The leadership team will determine who will respond to the agency overview portion of the assessment process, including the targeted program questions. The leadership team is also responsible for approving the final written assessment response for submission to the Department.

Role of Child Welfare Agency

County child welfare agency staff play a critical role in the assessment process by completing the agency overview, reviewing and supplementing the data profiles, preparing and facilitating the discussion groups, and completing the outcomes portion of the assessment tool. While the assessment process will create significant demands on staff time, the active and willing participation by staff is crucial to the success of the assessment process. The long-term benefits of greater community engagement in the child welfare program and improved understanding of program outcomes for local planning purposes will make the effort worthwhile. The assessment process also provides an ideal opportunity for child welfare staff to raise issues of local interest with the stakeholder groups.

The data profiles, assessment instructions and assessment tool will be available for downloading from the Department web site or distributed via e-mail to simplify the assessment response. Department staff will be available throughout the assessment process to provide technical assistance.

Child Welfare Agency Overview

The agency overview portion of the assessment process is designed to capture information about how counties operate their child welfare program and deliver services, including child welfare agency structure, local policies and practices, and service delivery strategies. The agency overview information will be used by the Department for state-level strategic planning and to prepare for the federal review. The results will be shared with the University of Wisconsin Training Partnerships to identify training needs and develop training curriculum for local agency staff. The results will also be used by the Department to develop technical assistance and program monitoring activities. Following the completion of the assessment process, the Department will produce a comprehensive report on local child welfare program operations that will be shared broadly with local agencies to provide information on child welfare program performance and how local programs are operated statewide.

In addition to questions about child welfare agency structure and operations, the agency overview is also designed to address specific aspects of child welfare program services. These areas include how certain federal and state child welfare program requirements are implemented at the local level along with working relationships between the child welfare agency and key organizations such as the courts. These targeted program questions pertain to detailed aspects of the outcome data whereas the community discussions concentrate on issues of broader interest. While child welfare agency staff can complete much of the agency overview on their own, parts of the overview will require consultation with other organizations or individuals. Counties are encouraged to work on the agency overview at the beginning of the assessment process as there may be some aspects of the overview that will be beneficial to share with stakeholders in the community discussions or otherwise be useful in framing how those discussions should be conducted.

Community Discussions with Stakeholders

The community discussions are designed to engage key stakeholders in examining child welfare program outcomes and talking about factors that influence program outcomes in the county. These factors can include the demographics of the population, the structure of the local child welfare program, the degree of collaboration between agencies, local service strategies, the availability of service providers, and a number of other factors. The discussions will involve stakeholders in an open, constructive dialogue about the safety, permanence and well-being objectives of the child welfare program and help stakeholders realize what impact their activities have on child welfare program outcomes in their county. The discussions will lead to increased awareness of child welfare program issues by stakeholders, greater interest in collaboration mechanisms, and stronger cross-system efforts to improve service quality and outcome achievement.

Counties will have considerable flexibility in conducting the community discussions in terms of the type and number of stakeholders to participate in the discussions and the manner in which the discussions are held. The assessment leadership team can determine how the discussions should be conducted. Many counties may have existing advisory groups that can be used for the community discussions or ad hoc groups can be established. These groups often include the key stakeholders and are typically already involved in local program planning. Counties are encouraged to use members of such planning or advisory groups for their community discussions as much as possible.

The assessment tool includes suggestions on how to organize the discussion groups and a standard list of questions for groups to discuss. County child welfare agencies will need to provide the discussion participants with background information about the local child welfare program, an orientation to the assessment process, and interpretation of the county data profiles and any other local data regarding local services and program outcomes. It is also recommended that county child welfare agency staff actively participate in and facilitate the discussions to respond to questions regarding terminology, child welfare program requirements and other questions that the participants may have.

Assessment Response

Once the agency overview, targeted questions and community discussions are completed, child welfare agencies will submit a written response to the Department covering the items in the assessment tool. This assessment response should be shared broadly at the local level to help educate the community about child welfare program issues and guide local agencies in planning for their child welfare programs. The local leadership team will approve the assessment response for submission to the Department.

The Department will expect counties to use the assessment results in planning for the use of funds received from the state, including setting priorities for the use of funds and establishing local outcome measures to determine the effectiveness of child welfare services. The Department will also use the assessment results to develop program improvement strategies at the state level, including setting targets for program outcome achievement. The assessment results will be made available by posting county responses to the Department's web site.

Timeframe for Assessment Process

The assessment process will begin in mid-March with the release of a numbered action memo providing instructions for the assessment process and the assessment tool along with release of the county data profiles. Counties will have the period of mid-March through mid-June 2001 to conduct the local assessment process, including completing the agency overview and the community discussions. Assessment responses will be due to the Department by the end of June.

The Department is holding a series of regional roundtable meetings in late March following the release of the action memo to explain the assessment process to leadership teams, child welfare agency staff and other interested persons. These meetings will provide an opportunity to ask questions about the process and discuss how to best conduct the process.

Area Administration staff from the Department's Office of Strategic Finance will be available to assist counties to begin their assessment process and those staff will periodically check on progress by counties in their region over the course of the assessment period. Division of Children and Family Services staff will also be available throughout the assessment period to respond to questions and provide technical assistance on the use of the data profiles and assessment tool.

Communication efforts are being made at the state level to make key stakeholders, particularly those needed on the leadership team, aware of the child welfare assessment process. Information about the assessment process will be shared with stakeholders through their organization newsletters and other means.

While the local assessment process is being conducted, the Department is establishing a state steering committee consisting of the same stakeholder groups who will be involved at the local level to advise the Department on how to use the results of the assessment process for state-level program planning. This state steering committee will be used as a forum to establish strategic objectives at the state level, including setting goals for program improvement and legislative agendas.

Contacts for More Information:

Regional Offices	Northeastern	Green Bay	John Cole	920-448-5336
	Northern	Rhineland	Pat Cork	715-365-2523
	Western	Eau Claire	Harry Hobbs	715-836-2285
	Southern	Madison	Steve Obershaw	608-243-2417
	Southeastern	Waukesha	Tom Redding	262-521-5089
Central Office	Michelle Rawlings, DCFS, Office of Policy, Evaluation and Planning Phone 608-264-9846 Email rawlimm@dfhs.state.wi.us			